Chrar-e-Sharief

Victory for Hardliners on Both Sides

Gautam Navlakha

The government's version of the burning of Chrar-e-Sharief and the events leading up to it are full of holes, but more important is it that the destruction of the shrine has dealt a blow to the efforts of Kashmiri leaders such as Shabir Shah and Yasin Malik who have been working courageously to bring the gun under political control in Kashmir.

The burning down of the shrine of Sheikh Noor-ud-din Noorani, regarded as the patron saint of all Kashmiris, in the early hours of May 11 confirms the worst fears about the evil consequences of a military response to the democratic aspirations of a people. Just as Operation Bluestar took place on Guru Arjun Dev's anniversary, Id-ul-Zoha became the day for the burning of Chrar-e-Sharief. On May 8, two days before the shrine was destroyed, about a thousand buildings around the shrine were burnt to cinders. Since journalists and other observers have not been allowed anywhere close to the shrine after March, there is no independent confirmation of the death toll or even about the allegation that the militants had planted explosives in and near the shrine. The fact that Kashmiri leaders such as Yasin Malik of the JKLF and Shabir Shah and Abdul Ghani Lone of the Hurriyat Conference were stopped and arrested and journalists disallowed from visiting the shrine to see the damage caused by the fire on May 8 strengthened the apprehension that security forces were anticipating if not preparing the ground for some action.

As expected, the government, after initial fumbling about the sequence of events leading upto shrine's destruction, has blamed 'Pakistan-trained mercenaries'. The minister of state for internal security, Rajesh Pilot, upped the *ante*. by warning Pakistan that "we shall have no option but to accomplish the unfinished task" — threatening to declare war, in other words. This sabre-rattling appears to be an attempt at deflecting public attention by building up anti-Pakistan hysteria. Official statements, accepted unquestioningly by the media and political commentators, are full of holes. Officials claim that the army did not move towards the shrine or return fire until after the militants had burned down the shrine. They add that no more than

10 militants were killed in the "gun battle when troops foiled the mercenaries' bid to escape". Officials argue that the militants and 'their masters' wanted to upset the speedy improvement in the situation in Kashmir, especially the government's efforts to reintroduce democratic processes through elections. However, police sources have stated (*The Tribune*, May 12) that the army had come under heavy fire by 11:30pm on May 10 and major exchange of fire had taken place between the two sides when "the soldiers had started moving forward to prevent foreign mercenaries from blowing up the shrine". This lends some credence to the militants' claim that the army had advanced towards the shrine and fired mortar shells and that 32 militants in all had been killed.

The other claim of the officials — that militants had burned the 1,000 buildings on May 8 to intimidate the local population — is even more incredible. It makes no sense for the militants to clear the area surrounding the shrine when they were running out of ammunition. The buildings obstructed the armed forces and to that extent protected the militants. The militants would certainly not have wanted to give the army a clear range and offer themselves as sitting ducks. Indeed the May 8 arson, according to residents of Chrar-e-Sharief (*The Hindustan Times*, May 9) was caused by the army firing mortars. The fact that the tire brigade could enter the area and douse the fire close to the shrine also raises doubts about allegations that the militants had planted land mines, explosives, etc. Let us also remember that in the early days when journalists still had access to the area no such allegations had been levelled. These charges began to be made only after the authorities clamped down on the journalists' access to Chrar-e-Sharief.

Whether the May 8 fire which cleared the shrine of the surrounding 'obstructions' was intentional or not, the fact remains that for the first time Indian security forces had the shrine within the unobstructed range of their firearms, The 50–60 militants inside the shrine did not pose much of a problem for the Indian administration and there was no pressing need to engage in retaliatory strikes, especially if it were true, as the government claims, that the militants had laid explosives in the shrine. In any case, it was common knowledge that any direct hit on the shrine by the security forces, even minus explosives, carried the risk of the more than 500-years-old wooden shrine catching fire. Therefore, the decision to attack or even retaliate must have been cleared by the highest government authority.

NO ENQUIRY

The militants cannot escape blame for taking shelter in the precincts of the shrine. But then it has to be remembered that it is the Indian government's repression let loose by the then governor Jagmohan which is the principal cause for thousands of Kashmiris taking up arms. The present governor is on record that in December 1989 there were 36 companies of security forces fighting 300 militants. By March 1993 there were 300 companies of the security forces and one division of the army fighting 10,000 militants with another 5,000 across the border. This was after 2,000 militants had been killed and 10,000 apprehended. Kashmiri youth began going across the border in large numbers only after March–April 1990. And now there are approximately half a million men of the army, the so-called Rashtriya Rifles and the para-military forces controlling Indian-held Kashmir and fighting an unspecified number of militants — after having killed more than 4,000 and arrested nearly 20,000.

It may be suggested that the destruction of the shrine was the result of an accident or a decision taken by local commanders. However, this is very unlikely, considering the politically sensitive nature of the shrine with its emotional and religious appeal. Also, the handling of the siege of the Hazratbal shrine showed that the prime minister's office (PMO) is directly involved in even decisions on day-to-day matters. What is more, with the formation of the department of Kashmir affairs under the charge of the PMO, it is doubtful if any local commander could operate at Chrar-e-Sharief without a clear brief. In other words, the possibility of the destruction of the holy shrine must have been taken into consideration by the highest political authority. Decision-makers may have calculated on a muted response to the destruction of the shrine from those quarters in Islam which have frowned on worship at the shrine of the Sufi saint. The Indian high commissioner in UK went so far as to claim in an interview with the BBC on May 11 that fundamentalists had destroyed the shrine since they regarded it as a 'Hindu' structure.

On May 9, the day before the destruction of Chrar-e-Sharief: the right and left in parliament unitedly condemned the government for 'kneeling' before the militants. Not a word was said about the Kashmiri people's alienation and the violence perpetrated against then. Indeed there was not even the usual vacuous talk of the political process. And on May 11, barring the CPI(M), all the parties in parliament blamed the 'mercenaries' for the destruction. No one bothered to examine the official claims or worried that the events in Chrar had gravely undermined the efforts of Kashmiri leaders such as Shabir Shah, Yasin Malik and others who had worked courageously to bring the gun under political control. It is a double defeat for them because for

the first time in six years they had begun to reach out to the Indian public. The destruction of the shrine is a victory for hardliners on both sides.

The prime minister has ruled out a judicial inquiry into the destruction of Chrar-e-Sharief on the ground that it was an "operational matter" and these are "never made the subject of judicial inquiries". This was hardly surprising, though the government has insisted that the blame for burning of Chrar town and the shrine lay with the Pakistan-backed mercenaries and that the government had irrefutable evidence to that effect. Once again, there was no protest in parliament over the rejection of the demand for an independent probe. The MPs only chastised the government, for failing to foil the alleged conspiracy of the Pakistan-backed mercenaries to destroy the shrine. The 22-member all-party delegation of MPs which visited Chrar and was confronted by the victims of the fire who shouted slogans against the Indian army whom they blamed for burning the shrine, had nothing to say to assuage the people's sense of hurt. Indeed a few days earlier CPI leader Indarjit Gupta had deprecated reports in a section of the press that, according to him, 'maligned' the army by blaming it for the destruction of the shrine. He advised the press to exercise 'restraint' in such matters.

On March 31 some 25 journalists had been attacked and beaten up by the CRPF in Jammu when the Jammu Press Association took out a peaceful procession from Residency Road to the state secretariat to protest against interference by police and security forces in the day-to-day functioning of newspersons. Neither the Press Council nor the Editors' Guild was moved to protest against the attack. Two weeks before this incident, on March 17, restrictions had been placed on the entry of journalists and 'outsiders' into Chrar. This was done after the army moved in and took positions around Chrar-e-Shariet. Between then and the May 8 arson which destroyed a large number of buildings around the shrine, the Indian media did not once protest against the restrictions placed on the press in Kashmir.

Throughout the period of the siege of Chrar-e-Sharief, BJP MPs routinely accused the government of adopting a soft policy *vis-a-vis* the 'mercenaries'. On March 20 the BJP said that concern for the safety of the shrine should not be made an excuse for inaction. They demanded that security forces be given a free hand to deal with the militants.

DISCREPANCIES IN OFFICIAL CLAIMS

As early as on February 24 the army chief had told the press at Pune that "nearly 100 militants" had taken shelter in Chrar-e-Sharief. But he hastened to add that the

number of militants was no more than a guess. On March 11 general J S Dhillon told reporters in Srinagar that "for the capture of 30 to 40 militants there in the town we cannot risk the life and property of people". This was later confirmed after the burning of the shrine hy the local commander at Chrar-e-Sharief. brigadier Mohinder Singh, who told BBC on March 12 that there were no more than 35 militants in Chrar-e-Sharief. Yet officials and the media have quoted fanciful figures of anywhere between 100 and 500 militants holed up in Chrar-e-Sharief. When no more than 32 are said to have been killed by the security forces, no one seems to know what has happened to the rest of the militants. Of the 14 bodies shown to the press, five turned out to he those of local residents, even though the army commander had claimed that there had been no civilian casualties (*Business Standard*, May 13).

Even on the presence of foreign militants in Chrar, there have been discrepancies in official statements. The army commander in Chrar has said that these were from Pakistan-held Kashmir and Pakistan and that there were none from Afghanistan (*The Times of India*, May 13). The same day the union home ministry stated that "there were in all seven confirmed foreign mercenaries ... Mast Gul ... is an Afghan national ... another was a Sudanese mercenary" (*Asian Age*, May 13).

General J S Dhillon, corps commander, told correspondents on May 12, "we had envisaged that after the winter the militants would come out of the shrine. When at the end of March we found no sign of their coming out, troops were called to patrol the outskirts of the town". He also claimed that the army neither laid siege to the town nor moved into the town until May 11 morning after the shrine was burnt down (*The Tribune*, May 13). But this is contradicted by other reports. The army had moved in and taken positions around Chrar by March 8 and from then on there were reports of regular exchange of fire. This would suggest a decision to engage the militants in intermittent gun battle to test their resolve and make whatever advance was possible to gain advantage. There had been heavy exchange of fire between the two sides between March 23 and 28 which had caused panic among the people (*Asian Age*, March 30). This situation continued until April 22 when, according to the police, the army succeeded in taking up positions on two hills, Natul Teng and Dekhin Bal, inside Chrar town. This brought them within 800 metres of the shrine. On April 23 a police constable was killed when the army opened fire on a police bus coming from Chrar (*The Times of India*, April 25). On April 26 an army spokesperson claimed that Mast Gul had told the local SHO that he would blow up the shrine. The SP of Badgam protested against the army claim and expressed the fear that such claims could result in the SHO being killed. On April 27 Bhuvanesh Chaturvedi, minister of state in the PMO, in a written reply to BJP's K L Sharma said that the government would consider flushing out militants and foreign mercenaries holed

up inside Chrar-e-Sharief and confirmed that there had been intermittent exchange of fire between the two sides. The UN Human Rights Commissioner lamented after the destruction of the shrine that the government had failed to protect the shrine despite the assurance given to him. What all this suggests is that the army had been preparing for action. The prime minister said on May 12 that the state administration and the security forces on the spot had been "given full authority" to deal with the situation in Chrar-e-Sharief.

Fire brigade personnel have accused the army of having ordered them to remain inside throughout the night May 10–11, warning them of dire consequences were they to attempt to douse the fire. Earlier, on May 8, fire tenders had been allowed 10 put out only fires close to the shrine. The police say that there was heavy firing by 11–11:30 pm on May 10 when the army began moving towards the shrine. A report by the correspondent of *The Tribune* (May 12) cites local police as saying that by 11.30pm on May 10 "a major exchange of fire took place between the militants and the troops. After three hours of crossfire … in which UMGs and LMGs were also used, the shrine of the Sufi saint was seen in flames". Former governor Girish Saxena made an oblique criticism of the army's moves in a recent interview: "As it is 25 odd militants are killed every week, and more than that number arc captured. There is. therefore, no great advantage in killing a dozen or two dozen ultras in a place of worship. The administration generally avoids a showdown at a shrine or any other densely populated place where it could be placed at a disadvantage politically or psychologically" (*The Hindustan Times*, May 21).

The initial efforts to shift the blame on to Pakistan and the bombast of government spokespersons warning Pakistan and even threatening war have come to nought. That the government has not been able to provide any evidence of Pakistan's role in the destruction of the shrine and that it has not lodged a formal protest with the Pakistan government through diplomatic channels makes it clear that its extravagant accusations were meant for domestic consumption. To divert attention once again the prime minister has been harping on the government's resolve to hold elections in Kashmir, He also said in parliament on May 16 that the government would "consider" anything short of "*azadi*" within the framework of the Constitution in Kashmir. The BJP promptly warned that "conferring autonomy on the state would give a fillip to fissiparous and centrifugal forces all over the country".

This shadow-boxing between the Congress and the BJP will continue to divert attention from the real issues and tasks in Kashmir.